

Barbara Smith

THE TRUTH
THAT NEVER
HURTS *Writings*
on Race, Gender, and
Freedom 

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

 THIS ARTICLE, written for a 1994 issue of the lesbian feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* that focused upon the theme “Allies,” serves as a companion piece to “Racism and Women’s Studies.” The fact that they were written fifteen years apart points to how deeply embedded racism is in U.S. society. Racial conditions have continued to degenerate since the 1970s as a result of the government’s increasing conservatism; the shift to the right of the population as a whole; the flourishing of a militant and strategically effective right-wing movement; and deteriorating economic conditions which hit the poorest people hardest.

Because institutional racism is enforced and maintained by state power, challenging the state, demanding justice, and building new systems in which power and resources are equally distributed offer the only viable means for eradicating racism. Unfortunately, in a period of ideological confusion, backlash, and real setbacks in maintaining a minimal social safety net and basic civil rights, it is difficult for some to grasp that it is necessary to do more than think, talk, and write to alter the status quo. Examining the history of antiracist struggles that have successfully brought sweeping political change can provide a much needed antidote to pessimism and to magical thinking about how change occurs.

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Before discussing how white lesbians can be allies to me as a Black lesbian, I first need to talk about what racism is and how it works. From the moment this continent was colonized, racism has been fundamental to this country’s functioning on every level. To this day, racism is systematically institutionalized in every aspect of the United States’ political, economic, and social life. Racism negatively affects the day-to-day lives of people of color in both devastating and “petty” ways, ranging from whether we grow up in poverty and die years earlier than whites to whether we will be waited on promptly and courteously whenever we enter a restaurant or a store.

There were two crucial events, directly tied to racism, that ensured this country’s successful European settlement. The first was the wholesale theft

of the land itself from the original inhabitants, the Native peoples, a process accomplished through war and other acts of genocide. The second was the importation of millions of Africans to work as slaves. The United States is built upon stolen land and stolen labor.

For racism to serve its essential purpose, which was and is the exploitation of people of color in order to maintain white economic and political power, i.e. white supremacy, a racist ideology also had to be put in place. Vicious stereotypes based upon the supposed inferiority of subhuman Indian and African "savages" were created in order to justify policies and acts that would otherwise be viewed as criminally inhumane. Racist ideology, attitudes, and beliefs, reinforced by segregation and discrimination, enable institutionalized racism to perpetuate itself.

Racism is not primarily a set of negative attitudes or behaviors on the part of individual whites. These negative attitudes and behaviors are grievous and sometimes fatal, but they are in fact symptoms of a system whose purpose is not merely to make people of color feel badly, but to maintain white power and control.

Of course there have always been people of color who have resisted white rule in every way we could. The abolition of slavery, the destruction of legal segregation, our ongoing movements that fight against racism, our very physical survival are all testaments to the resistance of people of color.

The concept of resistance brings me to how white lesbians (or anyone who is white) can be an ally to me as a Black person, a woman, and a lesbian. And that is to do political organizing with the ultimate goal of destroying the institutionalized, structural racism that oppresses all people of color, including Black lesbians. As a socialist I believe that racism will only be destroyed when capitalism is also destroyed, which means it will be a long struggle. However, there are various kinds of grassroots organizing that challenge the state which we can participate in, right now.

I consider white lesbians who do actual organizing to dismantle institutionalized racism in the society as a whole to be allies. Having a "safe space" within the lesbian community where concerned white lesbians might treat me as if I were human is all well and good, but it won't help at all when I am in my car and get pulled over by a cop who decides to crack my head open because I am Black. What would help would be for white lesbians to organize against police brutality, which is occurring in epidemic proportions against different groups of people of color all over the country. There are countless other issues to which antiracist white lesbians can bring their intelligence, activism, and support.

Doing antiracist organizing does not mean that one has to stop organizing against homophobia and sexism, as demonstrated by the multi-issued political practice of lesbian feminists of color. Indeed, given how linked all the systems of oppression are, organizing around what may seem to be one issue should quickly lead to work around related ones. For example, lesbians and gays have a history of being mistreated by the police, so working against police brutality has direct positive consequences for our lives. Opposing the Christian right wing's homophobic campaigns logically necessitates opposing their assaults on women's reproductive freedom, their racist efforts to institute school vouchers, and their anti-immigration initiatives.

Of course I want white lesbians to treat me like a human being and there have been too many instances in the last twenty years when they have not. I also would like white lesbians to know about and respect my culture and history. But most of all I need for white lesbians to do work toward eradicating the oppression that undermines the lives of all people of color, including mine. The white lesbians who have been friends, allies, and in some cases family to me for many years all do practical political work to end racism in this country. One aspect of that work is challenging racism in lesbian contexts, but limiting one's activities to lesbian settings is to confront just the tip of the iceberg. As I wrote several years ago, I don't live in the women's movement, I live on the streets of North America.

The only way oppressed groups' situations ever change in real life as opposed to in theory is through activism. Talk doesn't do it, trainings don't do it, books don't do it, pleasant attitudes don't do it. Organizing does. The white lesbian allies I can depend upon are those who are allies in struggle.

 WHEN THE SIMI VALLEY, California, jury acquitted the police officers who participated in the videotaped brutalization of Black motorist Rodney King, a spontaneous outpouring of rage led in Los Angeles to the most massive civil insurrection in U.S. history. The independent leftist weekly *The Guardian*, for which I sometimes wrote, asked if I would do a commentary on the events in Los Angeles. This article was completed less than a week after the jury's decision and appeared in the newspaper's next issue. Although it was often hectic, I liked writing for *The Guardian* and for *Gay Community News* in response to breaking news stories. It posed a different kind of challenge than doing long articles with sufficient lead time. *The Guardian*, founded in 1948, stopped publishing in 1992. Its demise left a huge gap in the quality of information and analysis available in this era of gigantic media monopolies.

Just as I predicted, the nation's short attention span soon shifted away from the lessons about race and class available from Los Angeles in the spring of 1992. Police brutality, however, is the late twentieth-century's version of lynching. What happened to Rodney King was not an isolated incident. One need only read the daily newspaper for the latest accounts of state-sanctioned terrorism or consider the summer 1997 case of Haitian immigrant and Brooklyn, New York, resident Abner Louima.*

THE RODNEY KING VERDICT

"BUT MOST AMERICANS DO NOT YET KNOW WHAT ANGUISH IS."

JAMES BALDWIN

When the verdict came down I was sitting with one of my oldest friends, Nellie McKay, in her kitchen in Madison, Wisconsin. I'd arrived a few hours earlier to visit and to speak as a guest of the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin, where Nellie teaches.

*See "A Rose" in this volume.

A Black woman friend of Nellie's called with the news, and we turned on National Public Radio. Suddenly we were thrust into the physical and emotional attitudes of grief: shoulders slumped, heads leaning on our hands, deep lines creasing our foreheads, and for me at least, tears right behind my eyes and my throat aching with a scream I could not let out.

After a while Nellie switched off the classical music that had followed the news and put on Bessie Smith. "I can't deal with Dvořák right now," she said wryly. Bessie sang "Trouble, trouble . . ." and I commented that her blues were the perfect counterpoint. Bessie knew there'd be days like this. She just didn't know that racism and poverty would be as violent and intractable at the end of the twentieth century as they were when she was alive at the century's beginning.

I said Black people should tear Los Angeles up, that we needed Watts II. As soon as I'd said it I felt the weight of those words. Besides hating violence in general, I realized that wishing for a "riot" was itself a reflection of African Americans' invisibility and powerlessness.

Watts II, however, was exactly what we got except that it spread much further than Watts, and the "rioters" were Latino and white as well as Black. The ghetto exploded and delivered the only message about racism, poverty, and despair that most of the white populace of this nation ever seems to notice. As I traveled from Wisconsin, to Ann Arbor, Michigan, to Cleveland, Ohio (where I grew up), I could catch only snatches of TV coverage but read every newspaper I could find. I soon got sick of comments that conveyed how many white people completely agreed with the verdict and were angry that we would be moved to violence in response to it. I was even more disgusted with the average whites who said that they'd never believed it when Black people "complained" about being oppressed and brutalized until now.

Quiet as it's kept, whether we are "rioting" or not, most African Americans live every day with greater or lesser amounts of rage toward white people and the system that gives them the power and privilege to decimate our lives. I know I do. When my cousin, who is not an activist or a radical, met me at the airport in Cleveland, she expressed more anger about what had happened in Los Angeles than I'd ever heard from her about anything. Although we might not have agreed on solutions, we were in almost total agreement about the problems.

What I felt at the King verdict and its aftermath was all too familiar. I felt the same gnawing in the pit of my stomach and in my chest when sixteen-year-old Yusuf Hawkins was gunned down on the streets of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in 1989. I felt the same impotent rage when the police

murdered sixty-seven-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs with a shotgun in the process of evicting her from her Bronx apartment in 1984. I choked back the same bitter tears when I heard the verdict in the 1991 rape case involving a Black woman student and several white male students at St. John's University on Long Island. I was just as terrified when they murdered four Black school girls (my age peers) by bombing a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. And even though I was too young to understand its meaning, I learned Emmett Till's name in 1955 because of witnessing my family's anguish over his lynching in Mississippi. .

So what do we do with all this fury besides burn down our own communities and hurt or kill anyone, white, Black, brown, or yellow who gets in our way? Figuring out what to do next is the incredibly difficult challenge that lies before us.

Above all, the events in Los Angeles have made it perfectly obvious why we need a revolution in this country. Nothing short of a revolution will work. Gross inequalities are built into the current system and Band-Aids, even big ones, won't cure capitalism's fundamental injustice and exploitation.

We need, however, to build analysis, practice, and movements that accurately address the specific ways that racism, capitalism, and all the major systems of oppression interconnect in the United States. It's not a coincidence that the most dramatic political and social upheavals in this country and also the most sweeping political changes have so often been catalyzed by race. In the United States, racism has shaped the nature of capitalism and of class relations.

It is our responsibility as Black activists, radicals, and socialists to create vibrant new leadership that offers a real alternative to the tired civil rights establishment and to the bankrupt "two-party" system. It is our responsibility as we build autonomous Black organizations to make the connections between all of the oppressions and to work in coalition with the movements that have arisen to challenge them.

Recognizing the leadership of radical women of color, feminists, and lesbians is absolutely critical from this moment forward. Women of color are already building a movement that makes the connections between race, class, gender, and sexual identity, a movement that has the potential to win liberation for us all.

It is past the time for talk. I really want to know how the white left, the white feminist, and the white lesbian and gay movements are going to change now that Los Angeles has burned. It's not enough to say what a shame all of this is or to have a perfect intellectual understanding of what

has occurred. It's time for all the white people who say they're committed to freedom to figure out what useful antiracist organizing is and to put it into practice.

I believe the King verdict and the insurrection in Los Angeles will galvanize unprecedented organizing. In Albany, New York, where I live, there is already a community strategy meeting scheduled for later in May. It is impossible to assess all the implications of these events only days after they occurred. I only wish that a week from now most of the people who live here would not find it so easy to forget.